

From Assessment to Annual Goal

Engaging a Decision-Making Process in Writing Measurable IEPs

Andrea M. Capizzi

After a relaxing summer vacation, “Ms. Engler,” a reading and math special education teacher, returned to her resource room refreshed and ready to start a new year. Within the first month, she gained a new student, “Paula,” who had transferred from a school across town. When Ms. Engler reviewed Paula’s individualized education program, however, she realized that it would be very difficult for her to monitor progress on the goals as currently written: Goals such as “Paula will improve her reading comprehension” and “Paula will complete word problems” were vague and not measurable. The present levels of academic achievement and functional performance included for Paula’s academic skills didn’t give Ms. Engler any idea of Paula’s current reading and math functioning. Paula’s IEP also didn’t provide information needed by “Ms. Sura,” the speech/language pathologist. Fortunately, a recent assessment report was included in Paula’s file and Ms. Engler and the IEP team were able to use the report, along with a bit of additional assessment of Paula’s skills, to write a comprehensive, measurable, and meaningful IEP that was more suited to Paula’s needs.

Many teachers face situations like Ms. Engler’s when they gain new students in their programs. Despite federal regulations requiring measurable individualized education programs (IEPs), IEPs are often vague and unfocused, making them difficult to use in guiding instructional planning. Although a well-written IEP can be time consuming and labor intensive, a clearly written IEP, based on documented student needs, can and should be a guidepost for selecting and designing effective instructional strategies to best meet a student’s needs. Assessment information is essential to developing measurable objectives that make IEPs useful.

Writing effective IEPs based on student assessment data does not have to be difficult. IEP teams can use several strategies to incorporate assessment data and develop assessment-based present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), annual goals, and short-term objectives (STOs).

Putting It in Legal Perspective

The IEP has been called the “heart and soul of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act” with potential that is

“unrealized and unappreciated” (Bateman, 1995, p. 1). Measurability of progress toward goal attainment has been and remains a consistent core component of the IEP. Assessment has been an essential element of the IEP since initial stipulation in Public Law 94-142 of the development of an IEP for each student receiving special education. Initially, accountability was a primary purpose of the IEP, but instructional and evaluative purposes were emphasized later as well (Bateman; Goodman & Bond, 1993). Reauthorization of P.L. 94-142 as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) required that IEPs include provisions for progress monitoring, present levels of performance to serve as baselines against which progress could be measured, and measurable goals and short-term objectives to outline steps toward goal attainment (Etscheidt, 2006; IDEA, 2004; Raines, 2002). IDEA removed the earlier





requirement of including short-term objectives, although the importance of ongoing progress monitoring and measurable annual goals was retained and reiterated in the reauthorization.

Recent legislation reflects the importance of writing IEPs based on individual, documented, data-based needs. According to IDEA regulations (2007) IEP teams must consider recent evaluations of the student when developing an IEP. Bateman and Herr (2006) stress the importance of measurability of IEPs along with actively measuring student progress in an ongoing manner. They encourage using relevant and current data to meet the legal requirements of progress monitoring. Assessment data should be used in the IEP and act as baseline information against which progress toward goals should be measured. Measurable goals, grounded in assessment results, should be included in IEPs to facilitate the progress-monitoring role of the IEP (Etscheidt, 2006; see box, "What Does the Law Say?"). Without providing adequate means of

measuring student progress on the IEP, teachers and school districts are vulnerable to possible litigation. Rulings have been made in favor of parents when inadequate progress monitoring and parent notification of progress has been

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in question (Bateman & Chard, 1998; Etscheidt, 2006). Furthermore, divergent goals and assessment data have also been cause for legal action and rulings (Etscheidt, 2003). Assessment data provide vital information for developing quality, legal IEPs that are suited to individual student needs and focused on driving a student's educational program.

Despite clear legal requirements, in practice there has been inadequate follow-through on incorporating assessment data and findings into IEP development. Research on IEP development

has found weak relations between IEPs and assessment reports (Rodger, 1995; Schenck, 1980). Goals and objectives are often unmeasurable (Bateman & Herr, 2006) and inconsistent with assessment data and present levels of performance (Rodger; Smith & Simpson, 1989). Assessment data provided on IEPs have also been found insufficient for making student need-based decisions and program planning (Brigham, Gustashaw, Wiley, & Brigham, 2004). Clearly, the legal requirements of incorporating assessment into IEP development are not fully affecting the practice of IEP development in schools.

Another point to consider is the lack of individualization in the development of many IEPs. Although it has been called the "backbone of a student's special education program" (Brigham et al., 2004, p. 304) and noted as a part of what makes special education "special" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995), IEPs are not always "individualized." Inadequate individualization has been attributed to standards-based curricula (Brigham et al.) and noted to vary by student placement (Espin, Deno, & Albayrak-Kaymak, 1998). Insufficient individualization, however, is not surprising given the limited use of assessment data in IEP development. Without using a particular student's assessment data, it is not possi-

ble to write an IEP that is focused on meeting the needs of that student. In order to identify specific needs and tailor a program suited to helping students make progress beyond baseline levels established at IEP development, assessment data must guide the development of measurable goals and objectives to benchmark and target progress.

The Role of Assessment in IEP Planning

In addition to being legally required, assessment data can help inform

instructional planning, monitor student progress, and draft meaningful and truly individualized IEPs. There is a logical progression from student assessment to the development of the IEP. Whether from an initial evaluation, reevaluation, or less formal annual evaluation of student academic, functional, and social and/or behavioral skills, assessment, should guide a team's IEP development. Findings from student assessments are useful for many IEP components such as PLAAFP, annual goals, and STOs. These three components are related to and progressively generated from each other. PLAAFP inform development of annual goals, which, in turn, guide development of STOs (see Figure 1).

PLAAFP should reflect an evaluation of the student's skills, strengths, and weaknesses (IDEA regulations, 2007) and enable the development of annual goals based on student needs and current abilities. Subsequently, STOs or benchmarks can be written as a basis to plan and evaluate student progress toward annual goals. Although not required in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 for students taking district assessments, IEP team members should be prepared to formulate STOs to identify steps toward achievement of annual goals to map, guide, and monitor instruction. STOs focus instruction by outlining small steps toward reaching annual goals. Furthermore, several parent and advocacy groups have made it clear that parents may request development of STOs or benchmarks in their children's IEPs (Cortiella, 2005; National Committee of Parents and Advocates Organized to Protect IDEA, 2006; Wright & Wright, 2006).

Using Assessment Data to Formulate the IEP

Encouraging Team Participation and Preparedness

Ms. Engler began gathering assessment data to use on the IEP. Fortunately, a comprehensive assessment had been conducted just prior to Paula's transfer to the new school and the report was in Paula's file. Before convening the IEP team meeting to work on writing a new IEP, Ms. Engler contacted all

What Does the Law Say?

§300.320 Definition of individualized education program.

(a) **General.** As used in this part, the term individualized education program or IEP means a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with §§300.320 through 300.324, and that must include—

(1) A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including—

(i) How the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled children); or

(ii) For preschool children, as appropriate, how the disability affects the child's participation in appropriate activities;

(2) (i) A statement of measurable annual goal, including academic and functional goals designed to—

(A) meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and

(B) Meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability;

(ii) For children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives;

(3) A description of—

(i) How the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals described in paragraph (2) of this section will be measured; and

(i) When periodic reports on the progress the child is making toward meeting the annual goals (such as through the use of quarterly or other periodic reports, concurrent with the issuance of report cards) will be provided.

Source: IDEA regulations, 2007.

members of the IEP team and encouraged them to prepare information for drafting a new IEP. Paula's IEP team included Ms. Engler; Ms. Sura, the speech/language pathologist; "Mr. Scarpelli," Paula's fourth-grade general education teacher; Paula's mother; and the school principal.

Team involvement in IEP development is vital to crafting a comprehensive document that meets the full range of a student's needs. All members of the IEP team—including but not exclusive to service providers, teachers, administrators, and parents—can provide useful information about the student. For example, a resource reading teacher might bring current assessment data on a student's reading level and strengths and weaknesses related to the student's current functioning, and a parent should be encouraged to bring updated

medical information and/or reports, questions, and concerns regarding their child's progress, and personal and family goals for the student.

The process of gathering this information is often time consuming for IEP team leaders. Given that most school professionals are already strapped for time, it is important to make this process efficient. Encouraging team members to gather information needed for IEP development prior to meeting enhances efficiency and acknowledges the value of team members' time. Just as each team member brings a different perspective on the student to the meeting, each member may provide unique information regarding the student's needs. Providing each member of the team with a checklist (see Figure 2) to guide them as they gather information for the IEP may increase the likelihood that team members are pre-

pared when the meeting convenes. The aim of this checklist is to encourage each team member to consider the vital information for IEP development and feel acknowledged and valued as a contributing member of the IEP team. A more detailed graphic organizer (see Figure 3) can be used to guide IEP team members through the process of using assessment data to identify student needs and write more specifically targeted annual goals and STOs.

Compiling Assessment Data

Ms. Engler gathered standardized testing results and incidental information included in the assessment report to write PLAAFP, annual goals, and STOs for Paula's reading comprehension and math computation needs. In math, it appeared that Paula had trouble with basic computation and word problems. Because the report did not include much information on Paula's reading fluency beyond standardized testing scores, Ms. Engler used curriculum-based measurement (CBM) probes to identify how many words Paula read correctly per minute, providing a baseline measure of Paula's oral-reading fluency. Further, the assessment report

stated that Paula had trouble with several school survival skill issues such as homework completion and attendance. Ms. Engler used the homework completion data and attendance data included in the report to guide development of goals in this area.

There are many sources of valuable assessment information that can provide measurable data for IEPs (see box, "Sample Assessment Tools"). For students who have met initial eligibility and those who have recently undergone a reevaluation, gathering information can be as simple as using data included in the comprehensive assessment report. Assessment reports often include standardized testing scores and incidental data that can be incorporated in IEPs. Further, assessment reports typically include statements of student needs that naturally fit into IEP development. For an annual IEP that does not immediately follow completion of a comprehensive evaluation and report, IEP team members should evaluate the student's skill levels and deficits. Given legal requirements for progress monitoring, IEP teams should conduct ongoing and annual assessments to evaluate

student progress—particularly helpful when a student is nearing the end of an IEP, and when this information can be used to formulate a new IEP.

It is important to keep in mind that goals should be measurable; the IEP should specify how progress toward meeting annual goals will be evaluated (Bateman & Herr, 2006; IDEA regulations, 2007). The method of measuring progress should include an academic, functional, or social behavior that can be counted, retested, and used for objective comparison with future performance. PLAAFP and measurable annual goals should include descriptions of academic skills and behaviors that can be quantified, or counted, and compared throughout the year to gauge student skill development. From identification of student strengths and weaknesses, to actual summative data obtained on certain assessment measures, assessment information should be translated to the IEP in the form of measurable PLAAFP and annual goals that are specific, measurable, and relevant to student needs (Bateman & Herr; Wright & Wright, 2006).

Figure 1. Progression From Assessment to IEP

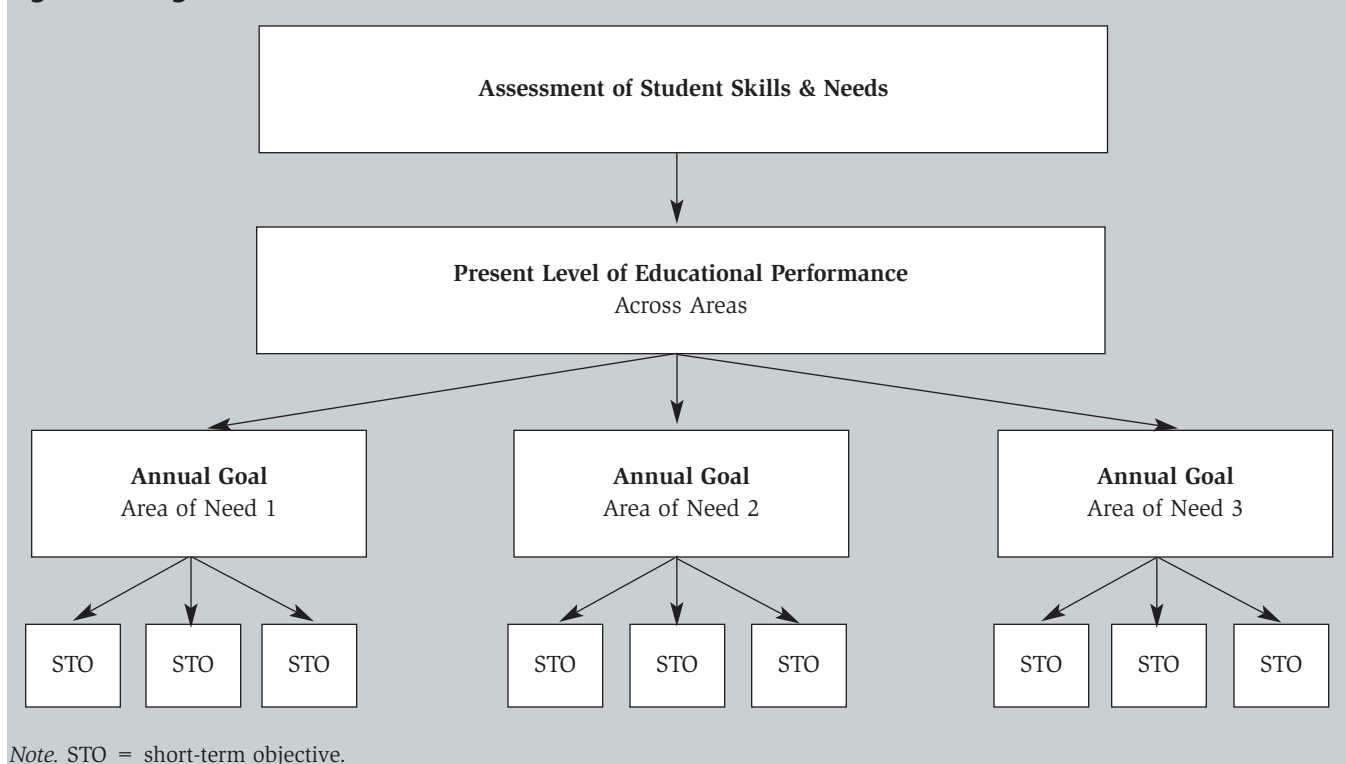


Figure 2. IEP Team Meeting Information Checklist

In preparation for the IEP team meeting for _____ (student name) scheduled for _____ (date), please review the following checklist of items and considerations prior to the meeting. Please contact _____ (IEP team coordinator) at _____ (e-mail/phone number) if you have questions.

Parent/Guardian

- ☐ Recent medical information/reports
- ☐ Information, contact persons, consent forms for related agency communication
- ☐ Your personal/family goals for your child
- ☐ Your child's strengths in the home/community environment
- ☐ Any other concerns you would like to share with the team

Academic/Related Service Provider

- ☐ Recent assessment/observational data regarding current functioning and sources of information regarding student
- ☐ List of student strengths/needs in your area
- ☐ Suggested goals for student 1 year from the date of meeting
- ☐ Information regarding student progress since last IEP meeting (if not initial IEP meeting)
- ☐ Thoughts on amount of service student needs

General Education Teacher

- ☐ Recent assessment/observational/academic data regarding student's current performance in your classroom and sources of information regarding student
- ☐ List of student strengths/needs in your area
- ☐ Supports/accommodations student needs to fully access education in your environment
- ☐ Thoughts on amount of service student needs

Outside Agency

- ☐ Contact information and information on services your agency provides to the student
- ☐ Signed parental/guardian consent forms for school to communicate with your agency
- ☐ Goals your agency has identified for the student

Administrator

- ☐ Knowledge of student's learning history gained through review of student records
- ☐ Information on program options for student in the local education agency and beyond

Assessment-Based PLAAFP

Once Ms. Engler had gathered assessment information and had conducted additional evaluation of Paula's current skills, she wrote a PLAAFP statement for each area of Paula's need: reading comprehension, reading fluency, math calculation, and school survival skills. Ms. Engler wrote the following statement for Paula's reading fluency:

Paula's Broad Reading was at the 1.4 grade equivalency as measured using the Woodcock-Johnson III (WJ-III; Woodcock, McGrew & Mather, 2001). Her reading fluency fell at the 1.8 grade equivalency. Paula read 40 words correctly per minute (WPM) on second-grade-level CBM passages, and 26 WPM on third-grade-level passages. Paula knows 70% of first-grade-

Sample Assessment Tools

Standardized test scores (full test, subscales, and subtests)

- Percentiles
- Grade equivalents
- Error analysis of missed items

Curriculum-based measurement probes

- Reading: number of words read correctly in one minute
- Writing: number of correct word sequences
- Math: number of correct digits

Behavioral observation data

- Frequency: attendance, work completed, and so forth.
- Latency: amount of time to begin working after given an assignment
- Rate: number of times student initiates interactions with a peer during a 20-min cooperative learning activity
- Duration: how long a student remains in his or her seat

Work samples (with specific, quantifiable descriptions)

- Written work: number of words per sentence, number of sentences per paragraph, and so forth.
- Quality of work: organize items by color or size with a certain level of accuracy, complete an assignment with a certain percentage of legible handwritten words

level Dolch sight words and 32% of second-grade-level Dolch sight words.

Following basic identifying information for a student, one of the first sections of the IEP is a description of the student's current functioning. PLAAFP act as a baseline against which progress can be measured (Wright & Wright, 2006) and set the stage to guide and monitor academic and functional progress throughout the upcoming year. PLAAFP may be provided for medical, social/emotional, cognitive, communication, academic, and motor functioning as appropriate for the individual student. This portion of the IEP

Figure 3. Graphic Organizer for IEP, PLAAFP, Annual Goal, and STO Development

Student: _____ Broad Area of Need: _____ Date: _____

Step 1: Consider your current assessment data on the student related to the identified area of need and fill in the information below.

Step 2: Based on your assessment data, identify broad needs for the student and fill in one need in each box marked “Need” below.

Step 3: Now, write an Annual Goal for each “Need” that you identified. These should be feasible goals projecting the student’s progress for the upcoming year.

Step 4: Underneath each Annual Goal, list steps or skills that the student will need to gain in order to achieve the goal.

Current Assessment Data		Sources of Assessment Data
Need	Need	Need
Annual Goal	Annual Goal	Annual Goal
Steps/Skills to Achieve Goal:	Steps/Skills to Achieve Goal:	Steps/Skills to Achieve Goal:
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.

Note. IEP = individualized education program; PLAAFP = present levels of academic achievement and functional performance; STOs = short-term objectives;

provides a snapshot of the student’s skills at the time of the IEP development that can be used to gauge progress over the duration of the IEP (deBettencourt & Howard, 2007; Wright & Wright).

Measurable PLAAFP can be stated through use of normative percentiles, specific counts of behaviors, CBM performance, or grade-level performance (deBettencourt & Howard, 2007; Wright & Wright, 2006). PLAAFP should be stated positively, focusing on what a student is able to do rather than what a student cannot do. The primary purpose of PLAAFP is to provide a place from which to start teaching the student (Bateman & Herr, 2006).

Writing PLAAFP-Based Annual Goals

After writing PLAAFP for reading fluency, Ms. Engler wrote a measurable annual goal to project reasonable but ambitious progress for Paula. Knowing that Paula was several grade levels behind her fourth-grade peers in reading, Ms. Engler was hopeful that she could help Paula gain a bit of ground in the upcoming year. Ms. Engler chose to use CBM reading fluency to project an annual goal for Paula’s reading fluency. Based on Paula’s 26 WPM on third-grade-level CBM passages, Ms. Engler projected an ambitious growth rate of 1.5 words per week (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Walz, & Germann, 1993). Knowing that there were 32 weeks left

in the school year, Ms. Engler calculated a reading fluency goal for Paula:

Given a third-grade-level reading passage, Paula will read at least 74 words correctly per minute by June 2008 (end of the current school year).

After interpreting assessment data to write a statement of PLAAFP, the next step in formulating a meaningful IEP is to identify appropriate annual goals for the student. These goals should stem from the student’s educational needs and intellectual functioning, as documented through assessment. At least one annual goal should be written for each area of educational need noted in the PLAAFP. Annual goals should reflect the team’s professional opinion

Table 1. Sample PLAAFP and Related Annual Goals and STOs

Student	PLAAFP	Annual Goal	STOs
Martina	Martina demonstrates difficulty with work completion. Over the past 3 weeks, she has turned in an average of 40% of in-class assignments and 20% of homework assignments each week.	Martina will complete and turn in 90% of in-class assignments and 80% of homework assignments each week, as noted in the teacher grade book.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given a class planner, Martina will write down homework assignments for each class period with 100% accuracy for 5 consecutive school days, as measured by teacher review of Martina's planner at the end of the day. Martina will complete and turn in class assignments with no more than one verbal reminder, at least 75% of the time, for three consecutive weeks, as measured by teacher observation.
Reggie	Reggie's math computation score is at the 1.3 grade equivalency as measured by the WJ-III. He adds single digit numbers with accuracy but inconsistently subtracts numbers without regrouping.	Given a worksheet with 20 two-digit mixed addition and subtraction problems, with regrouping, Reggie will complete the problems with 80% accuracy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When shown flash cards of addition facts (0-10), Reggie will say the answer to each fact within 3 sec of being shown the flash card, with 100% accuracy. Given a worksheet with 20 2-digit addition problems without regrouping, Reggie will complete the problems with 90% accuracy.

Note. PLAAFP = present levels of academic achievement and functional performance; STOs = short-term objectives; WJ-III = Woodcock-Johnson III (Woodcock, McGrew & Mather, 2001).

of a realistic goal for student progress over the upcoming year (Bateman & Herr, 2006; deBettencourt & Howard, 2007) and should be ambitious, but realistic. As with PLAAFP, well-written annual goals should be measurable (deBettencourt & Howard; IDEA regulations, 2007; Wright & Wright, 2006). To make it possible to evaluate student progress, annual goals should also reflect the tools used to identify the student's present level of performance.

There are three essential components to annual goals: (a) a specific description of the skill, (b) how the skill will be measured, and (c) the criterion against which progress will be measured. Ms. Engler included each component in Paula's goal. If PLAAFP is the "starting line," the annual goal is the "finish line" target for the year covered by the IEP.

STO and Benchmarks

Ms. Engler wasn't finished preparing for the IEP meeting once she had written her annual goals for Paula. She followed up each goal with targeted STOs to allow her to monitor Paula's steps toward reaching her goals. To follow up the fluency goal of 74 WPM on third-grade-level passages, she wrote the fol-

lowing STOs to guide her instruction and allow her to monitor Paula's reading fluency progress:

- *Given a randomized list of first-grade-level sight words, Paula will read the words orally with 100% accuracy on 3 consecutive trials.*
- *Given a randomized list of second-grade-level sight words, Paula will read the words orally with 100% on 3 consecutive trials.*
- *Given a randomized list of third-grade-level sight words, Paula will read the words orally with 75% accuracy on 3 consecutive trials.*
- *Given a second-grade-level reading passage, Paula will read at least 76 words correctly per minute on 3 consecutive passage readings.*
- *Given a third-grade-level reading passage, Paula will read at least 50 words correctly per minute on 3 consecutive passage readings.*
- *Given a third-grade-level reading passage, Paula will read at least 62 words correctly per minute on 3 consecutive passage readings.*

IDEA 2004 removed the requirement to include short-term objectives and benchmarks in IEPs for all students except those who take alternate district assessments (see IDEA, 2004; IDEA regulations, 2007). However, as noted earlier, short-term objectives and benchmarks allow teachers to monitor student progress toward annual goals and therefore are important to the development, modification, and revision of educational interventions to meet student needs. In fact, some disability advocacy groups have expressed concern over the elimination of STOs and benchmarks from IEPs as detrimental to educational programming and monitoring (Alliance for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities, 2006; National Committee of Parents and Advocates Organized to Protect IDEA, 2006; National Down Syndrome Society, 2006). Moreover, parents can request STOs appear on their child's IEP. STOs are written following the same structure as annual goals, including the description of the skill, specification of how the skill will be measured, and the criterion against which progress will be measured. The skill objective should be described in measurable terms with specification of the

Annual goals . . . should be ambitious, but realistic.

conditions and criterion for performance. Table 1 provides examples of PLAAFP and corresponding annual goals and STOs.

Final Thoughts

The day of Paula's IEP meeting arrived and all team members were in attendance. Paula's mother stated that she appreciated receiving the IEP planning checklist from Ms. Engler and that she had never thought about bringing along Paula's most recent health and psychological report to the IEP meeting. She also stated that she was pleased to have time to think about her goals for Paula. Mr. Scarpelli shared work that Paula had completed in the fourth-grade classroom and explained that he would like some assistance in modifying assignments in science and social studies to make them more meaningful and accessible to Paula. Ms. Sura shared her most recent information on Paula's speech-language needs and discussed her completed IEP graphic organizer. The principal brought along Paula's school records, which she had reviewed prior to the meeting, and shared that she felt that the services Paula needed could be provided within the school. Overall, it was a very efficient meeting with all participants leaving the meeting feeling valued and included in the process of developing a relevant and truly individualized IEP to best serve Paula's needs.

From experience, we know that many IEP meetings do not always flow smoothly, but with team support and good preplanning, teams can function more efficiently and better target student IEP needs. Although a time-consuming process, formulating a well-written IEP is worth the effort. It allows individualization of programming and focus on each student's needs. This effort should begin with evaluation of student academic, functional, social, and/or behavioral needs to provide sufficient baseline data from which to project and measure student growth over the upcoming year. Assessment data provides a starting point to guide

development of PLAAFP and annual goals, which in turn provide structure to a student's educational program. Structuring IEPs based on student assessment data meets the legal and ethical requirement of individualized educational programming necessary for all students requiring special education services. More important, it allows the IEP team to evaluate student progress and modify instruction to help students achieve their goals.

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Andrea M. Capizzi (CEC TN Federation), Assistant Professor of the Practice in Special Education, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Address correspondence to Andrea Capizzi, Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, Peabody #329, Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203-5721 (e-mail: Andrea.capizzi@vanderbilt.edu).

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